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ABSTRACT

Noting that linguistic, social, emotional, and cognitive development are complementary processes that ultimately work together to shape a child's literacy growth, this article discusses the relationship between children's development and their social interaction with knowledgeable others on the selection of children's literature for the promotion of literacy acquisition. A discussion of the importance of understanding child development to teaching, learning, and the selection of "just right" literature and how to support children's experiences with literature for optimal benefits is included. The paper also discusses a framework for understanding the interrelated nature of the cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and literacy development of children; social interaction; and literature selection in grades K-4. (Author/HTH)

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Table of Contents

# The Role of Child Development and Social Interaction in the Selection of Children's Literature to Promote Literacy Acquisition

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## Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between children's development and their social interaction with knowledgeable others on the selection of children's literature for the promotion of literacy acquisition. A discussion of the importance of understanding child development to teaching, learning, and the selection of "just right" literature and how to support children's experiences with literature for optimal benefits is included. The paper also discusses a framework for understanding the interrelated nature of the cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and literacy development of children, social interaction, and literature selection in grades K-4.

## Introduction

*She laughed and she cried as she read, and she exclaimed aloud in the high and echoing room: "Wow!"* (Spinelli, 1997, p. 74)

A book can serve as a kind of magic ticket to far away or even imaginary places. In the book *The Library Card*, author Jerry Spinelli tells the story of how a magic library card turns out to be the ticket to finding what each young character needs most at the time. This fantastic story certainly illustrates the point that good books can have an important influence on the mind of the reader. Indeed, most of us still remember a favorite book as a child that left a lasting impression. As a toddler, many remember the silly antics and language of a Dr. Seuss book such as *Green Eggs and Ham* or perhaps the comfort and security of Margaret Wise Brown's *Goodnight Moon* or the rhyme and rhythm of the *Mother Goose Tales*. Upon entering the elementary grades, many remember the beautiful friendship between Wilbur and Charlotte in E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, the mystery and intrigue in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, or the fanciful imaginary world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. These books continue to bring joy to our lives today and will live on forever as adults help children experience this joy.

## The Importance of Child Development to Teaching, Learning, and Literature

*Our images of children-as-learners are reflected, inevitably, in our definition of what it means to teach* (Wood, 1988, p. 1).

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The "magic" of literature for children is necessarily bound with the nature of their development. Research in past decades reflects our changing view of how children develop and learn. Children have their own unique needs, interests, and capabilities. We are born with the ability to organize, classify, and impose order on our environment, resulting in the construction of our own unique theory of the world (O'Donnell & Wood, 1999; Wood, 1988). Very little of the content and order of our theory is the result of direct instruction; rather, it is the interaction of biological, cultural, and life experiences that greatly affects the substance of our theory and the way we organize our experiences. As children encounter new experiences, existing memory structures in the brain or schema are reshaped, impacting the linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional development of children over time. Therefore, "knowledge cannot be *given* directly from the teacher to the learner, but must be *constructed by the learner and reconstructed* as new information becomes available" (Ryan & Cooper, 2000, p. 346). From this point of view, learning is not the result of development; rather, learning *is* development.

"From this perspective, which places instruction at the heart of development, a child's *potential* for learning is revealed and indeed is often *realized* in interactions with more knowledgeable others" (Wood, 1988, p. 24). For example, not too long ago, I visited my friend Diane who has a 4-year-old daughter. We were sitting in her living room talking when her little girl, Rachel, came running into the room with her favorite book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin, Jr., and illustrated by Eric Carle. On each page of the book, a different tissue-paper collage animal is introduced who urges the reader onward to discover which creature will show up next, with a repeated, rhyming, patterned text. She proceeded to crawl into Diane's lap, open the book, and start reciting the text, pointing and commenting on the various illustrations. Anyone looking at this scene would know that Rachel has been read to many, many times and finds great joy in the experience. A closer look might provide insight into how this experience will assist in Rachel's development:

- Positive emotions are created from the established lap reading routine that generates an intimate closeness and feeling of security.
- Interactive social dialogues between Rachel and her mother build on prior knowledge and provide immediate feedback as they discuss each animal as the story progresses.
- The language they use to label, compare, explain, and classify creates a supportive context for structuring the processes of thinking and concept formation.

Each of the domains of development—linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional—is affected during Rachel's experience, and all play an important role in her development. Although each domain constitutes an entire theoretical approach to child development, no single theory can explain the rich complexity of development (Santrock, 1999).

## Supporting Children's Experiences with Literature

Linguistic, social, emotional, and cognitive development are complementary processes that ultimately work together to shape a child's literacy growth (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky, a 20th-century Russian psychologist, theorized that social interaction shapes intellectual development and stressed the importance of language in the development of thought. Sociocognitive theory posits that social interaction is the primary means by which children arrive at new understanding. Rachel, for example, has acquired quite a bit of knowledge about the act of reading over time from these shared book experiences. Diane is a powerful model for Rachel when she demonstrates how to hold a book, which end of the book goes up, and which side is the front; when she takes care to turn the pages, always looks to the right page before moving on to the left page, and starts at the top of the page and moves down; when she reads with tone, inflection, enthusiasm, and expresses excitement and joy; when she points to pictures and words as she reads and pauses to discuss what she is thinking; and when she responds appropriately to Rachel's comments or questions. Rachel is also learning about storybook language, which is different from oral language, and the structure of stories. Vocabulary and concept development are also affected as Diane and Rachel work together to construct a meaningful experience around a common literacy event. From the first time Diane read *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* aloud to Rachel, she has scaffolded, or made adjustments, in her support based on constant feedback received from Rachel. As Rachel began to internalize the actions and language of her mother, she began to use these tools to guide and monitor her

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own processing behavior until she is now able to take over much of the responsibility for reading the book (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998).

Barbara Rogoff (1990) considers children to be apprentices as they acquire a diverse repertoire of skills and knowledge under the guidance and support of more knowledgeable persons. "In an apprenticeship setting, adults model the significance of written language as an important tool for documenting and communicating information. As adults and children engage in interactive oral discussions about written language, children acquire important tools of the mind for literacy acquisition" (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, as cited in Dorn, French, & Jones, 1998, p. 3).

## Selecting "Just Right" Literature

The selection of literature is key to providing an experience that results in promoting literacy development in that if the literature is not developmentally appropriate then what the child takes from the book and how he responds to the book will be limited or nonexistent. The book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* is perfect for Rachel because of its layout; repeated, rhyming, patterned text format; and simple concepts that promote cognitive development. On the other hand, a preservice teacher once told me that she read the very humorous *Piggie Pie* by Margie Palatini aloud to a group of preschoolers; but to her dismay, the preschoolers did not find the book nearly as funny as she did. In the story, a witch, hungry for piggie pie, visits a farm in order to get the main ingredient—pigs. The clever pigs disguise themselves as other farm animals and successfully fool the witch into thinking that the farm has no pigs. She is consoled in the end by a wolf that has also had difficulty finding pigs, and they go off together to "have lunch."

It is not uncommon for there to be differences between what children and adults find to be funny. The reason for this difference is the vast developmental gap between children and adults. "Often when humorous books fail to amuse children, it is indicative of a poor match between children's cognitive-developmental level and the reading material" (Jalongo, 1985, p. 109). Jalongo's research identifies characteristics of children's humor such as "cognitive challenge," or the intellectual ability required to understand a particular joke, and "novelty," or surprise, which is really the cornerstone of humor. If a child doesn't have the correct set of expectations, the unexpected is not surprising. Throughout the story, *Piggy Pie* draws much of its humor from references to other stories and songs such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, *To Grandmother's House We Go*, and an advertising campaign for the *Yellow Pages*, "let your fingers do the walking." The majority of preschoolers, not being familiar with these references, did not find *Piggie Pie* to be very funny.

The preschoolers did find parts of the story to be funny, especially when the pigs dress up like other farm animals. Jalongo (1985) points out, "Because young children are learning to distinguish between fantasy and reality, events that are incongruous with their expectations are considered to be funny" (p. 110). But the level of scaffolding that the teacher would have had to provide to assist the children in meeting the cognitive challenge to understand the expectations on which much of the humor in the book depended would have been considerable. As a result, this literature experience was not as beneficial for the majority of these preschoolers as perhaps another book selection might have been.

Although books at a variety of levels can and should be read to, with, or by children for a variety of reasons, books that are within a child's zone of proximal development are more likely to be intellectually stimulating. According to Vygotsky (1978), the zone of proximal development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). The book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* is within Rachel's zone of proximal development, and she derives great joy from it, while many of the textual references from which *Piggie Pie* draws its humor were outside the preschool children's zone of proximal development. A child who is not developmentally ready for a particular book will derive less joy and meaning from it and will respond differently to it. Teachers need to know each child as an individual—his or her level of development, rate of development, and varying interests—in order for the child to receive maximum benefit from his or her experiences with literature.

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## A Framework for Integrating Child Development, Social Interaction, and Literature Selection

A framework for understanding the interrelated nature of the cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic, and literacy development of children; social interaction; and literature selection in grades K-4 is provided in the appendix. The purpose of the framework is to provide a general guide for teachers, parents, and other caregivers in the appropriate selection of books that takes into consideration the importance of child development. In the far left-hand column of the framework, an overview of the general developmental characteristics of children in the areas of cognitive, language, social, emotional, and literacy development is provided. The middle column gives examples of important experiences that adults can provide when interacting with children and books based on the implications from the developmental characteristics for each grade level. The column at the far right is a list of suggested books appropriate for each stage of development. The books were selected based on recommendations from teachers, children, parents, and professional literature resources such as children's literature journals and books.

This framework is only approximate and should be informed by ongoing observational information acquired about individual children. With this in mind, the framework will assist in planning appropriate literature experiences and in understanding children's responses to books and book preferences at different levels of development.

## Conclusion

Wood (1988) states, "Our ideas about the nature of infancy and childhood dictate the ways in which we think about teaching and education" (p. 1). As teachers, if we believe that child development, teaching, and learning share a reciprocal relationship, then a clear understanding of the general characteristics of child development and our role through social interaction can assist us in selecting books that reflect a child's current developmental needs while promoting progress toward literacy development and the "magic" of reading.

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## Appendix

### A Framework for Integrating Child Development, Social Interaction, and Literature Selection

#### Preschool–Kindergarten

*Readers seek out and enjoy experiences with books and print; become familiar with the language of literature and the patterns of stories; understand and follow the sequence of stories read to them; begin to acquire specific understandings about the nature, purpose, and function of print; experiment with reading and writing independently, through approximation; and see themselves as developing readers and writers.**

| General Characteristics of Children | Implications for Adults for Social Interaction | Literature Selection |
|---|---|---|
| **Cognitive Development**<br>• Begins to understand spatial, perceptual, and attributional relationships<br>• Can retell a short story; has a vague concept of time; can count to 10 and knows primary colors<br><br>**Language Development**<br>• Experiences rapid vocabulary growth and speech development; uses correct verb and | • Importance of reading aloud simple picture books with easily identifiable characters and happy endings and poetry several times a day at school and at home<br>• Importance of actively involving children in shared reading in which they can participate in the reading process<br>• Importance of selecting literature about everyday experiences that also expands language and concept development. | • *Today I Feel Silly* (Jamie Lee Curtis)<br>• *Look! Look! Look!* (Tana Hoban)<br>• Mother Goose rhymes<br>• *Ten, Nine, Eight* (Molly Bang)<br>• *ABC I Like Me!* (Nancy L. Carlson)<br>• *No, David!* (David Shannon)<br>• *A Color of His Own* (Leo Lionni)<br>• *Red Light, Green Light* (Margaret Wise Brown)<br>• *A House Is a House for Me* (Mary Ann |

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| pronoun tense; uses language to explore the environment; enjoys playing with sound and rhythm in language<br>• Enjoys dramatic/role/creative play<br>• Understands that there is a connection between language and print<br><br>**Social and Emotional Development**<br><br>• Begins to develop relationships with other children and enjoys participating in group activities and games that use imagination<br>• Understands that others have feelings, too; expresses feelings through facial expressions<br>• Wants to help around the house and with younger siblings; takes pride in accomplishments; exhibits anxiety or fears (e.g., of the dark); likes to go to new and familiar places; likes to play with favorite toys | encourages curiosity about the world, and engages the imagination<br>• Importance of providing opportunities to respond to literature with peers and the teacher and also through writing/drawing<br>• Importance of providing, with guidance, opportunities for students to self-select fiction and nonfiction books, including alphabet, number, and concept books and books that include environmental print | Hoberman)<br>• *Peter's Chair* (Ezra Jack Keats)<br>• *Mouse Paint* (Ellen Stoll Walsh)<br>• *Noisy Nora* (Rosemary Wells)<br>• *Five Little Monkeys* (Eileen Christelow)<br>• *Bashi, Baby Elephant* (Theresa Radcliffe)<br>• *Color Zoo* (Lois Ehlert)<br>• *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Bill Martin, Jr.)<br>• *From Head to Toe* (Eric Carle)<br>• *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Bill Martin, Jr.)<br>• *The Three Little Pigs* (James Marshall)<br>• *Hop on Pop* (Dr. Suess)<br>• *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Crockett Johnson)<br>• *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (Beatrix Potter)<br>• *Millions of Cats* (Wanda Gag)<br>• *Tell Me A Story, Mama* (Angela Johnson)<br>• *Feast for 10* (Cathryn Falwell)<br>• *The Bus for Us* (Suzanne Bloom)<br>• *Dear Zoo* (Rod Campbell)<br>• *Trucks, Trucks, Trucks* ( Peter Sis) |

**Literacy Development**

- Enjoys listening and talking about stories and understands that print carries a message
- Identifies letters and letter-sound relationships and writes letters or approximations of letters and high frequency words
- Demonstrates logographic knowledge by identifying labels, signs, cereal boxes, and other types of environmental print
- Begins to pretend-read and engage in paper-and-pencil activities that include various forms of scribbling and written expression
- Understands basic concepts of print, such as left-to-right, top-to-bottom orientation
- Enjoys being read to and begins to engage in sustained reading and writing activities
- Becomes familiar with rhyming
- Develops a sense of story/story grammar/storybook reading behavior through interaction with storybooks



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### First and Second Grades

*Readers understand that reading is a meaning-making process; acquire sight vocabulary; make balanced use of the cueing systems in written language (syntax, semantics, and graphophonemics) to identify words not known at sight; and see themselves as readers and writers.**

| General Characteristics of Children | Implications for Adults for Social Interaction | Literature Selection |
|---|---|---|
| **Cognitive Development**<br>• Enjoys listening to stories read aloud and can listen to longer stories due to an increased attention span; still needs concrete experiences to learn<br>• Understands relationships among categories<br>• Has a vague understanding of time<br>• Is beginning to understand the difference between fantasy and reality<br><br>**Language Development**<br>• Continues to add words to the his or her vocabulary and uses increasingly complex sentences<br><br>**Social and Emotional Development**<br>• Begins to develop a sense of humor<br>• Has definite, inflexible ideas of right and wrong<br>• Occasionally challenges parents and argues with siblings but continues to need security of family relationships<br>• Continues to take pride in accomplishments, sometimes showing assertiveness and initiative | • Continued importance of reading aloud picture books and poetry several times a day at school and at home<br>• Importance of reading aloud short chapter books in which each chapter contains independent episodes<br>• Continued importance of small group and whole group opportunities to respond to literature with peers and the teacher and through writing/drawing—becoming more sustained overtime<br>• Continued importance of actively involving children in shared reading in which they observe the teacher demonstrate concepts about print and model using appropriate reading strategies with both fiction and nonfiction texts and involving student participation<br>• Importance of initial reading experiences being enjoyable using books with familiar concepts and experiences with predictable, repeated patterned text and then moving into longer texts with more complex structure<br>• Importance of giving children, with guidance, ample opportunities to select both fiction and nonfiction books on their own from a wide | • *Where the Wild Things Are* (Maurice Sendak)<br>• *Ramona* books (Beverly Cleary)<br>• *Junie B. Jones* books (Barbara Park)<br>• *Frog and Toad* books (Arnold Lobel)<br>• *A Chair for My Mother* (Vera B. Williams)<br>• *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry* (Molly Garrett Bang)<br>• *Pete's Pizza* (William Steig)<br>• *Crow Boy* (Taro Yashima)<br>• *Julius* (Angela Johnson)<br>• *Tops and Bottoms* (Janet Stevens)<br>• *Ira Sleeps Over* (Bernard Waber)<br>• *The Terrible, Horrible, No Good Very Bad Day* (Judith Viorst)<br>• *Toasting Marshmallows: Camping Poems* (Kristine O'Connell George)<br>• *Too Many Tamales* (Gary Soto)<br>• *Make Way for Ducklings* (Robert McCloskey)<br>• *Henry and Mudge* books (Cynthia Rylant)<br>• *The Relatives Came* (Cynthia Rylant)<br>• *My Little Sister Ate One Hare* (Bill Grossman)<br>• *The Talking Eggs: A Folktale from the American South* |



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| • Seeks teachers' praise<br>• Is curious about gender differences | variety of topics and to recommend books through book talks to other children<br>• Importance of providing children with opportunities for storytelling and dramatization of stories | (Robert D. San Souci)<br>• *Sam, Bangs, and Moonshine* (Evaline Ness)<br>• *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* (Kevin Henkes)<br>• *How Babies Are Made* (Andrew C. Andry and Steven Schepp)<br>• *Grandfather's Journey* (Allen Say)<br>• *A Light in the Attic* (Shel Silverstein)<br>• *The Bee Tree* (Patricia Polacco)<br>• *10 Minutes till Bedtime* (Peggy Rathmann) |

**Literacy Development**[**]

- Begins to read, write, and retell simple stories transitioning to longer stories with an increase in fluency and use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies more efficiently when comprehending and composing
- Develops greater word identification strategies, sight word recognition, conventional spelling, and sustained silent reading
- Reads orally initially and begins to read silently
- Uses letter-sound information along with meaning and language to solve words

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**Third and Fourth Grades**

*Readers increase fluency in reading and writing, increase motivation to read and write, and focus on meaning in reading and writing.*[*]

| General Characteristics of Children | Implications for Adults for Social Interaction | Literature Selection |
|---|---|---|
| **Cognitive Development**<br>• Begins to exhibit independence in reading, but a wide range of reading abilities and interests prevail<br>• Continues to develop concept of time and space<br>• Exhibits | • Continued importance of reading aloud more sophisticated picture books and poetry every day<br>• Importance of reading aloud longer chapter books with more variety, perspectives, and issues to promote interest and appreciation for a variety of genre<br>• Continued importance of sustained small group and whole group opportunities to respond to literature with peers and the teacher and through writing<br>• Continued importance of actively involving children in small group | • *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (John Steptoe)<br>• *The Boy Who Drew Cats: A Japanese Folktale* (Arthur A. Levine)<br>• *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* (Judy Blume)<br>• *Little House* |

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| improved memory with increased attention span<br>• Begins to connect ideas and concepts as thoughts become flexible and reversible, increasing capacity for problem solving, categorizing, and classifying<br><br>**Language Development**<br><br>• Exhibits increasing vocabulary<br>• Increases use of connectors such as *meanwhile, unless,* and *although*<br><br>**Social and Emotional Development**<br><br>• Begins to be influenced by social situation and peers<br>• Exhibits more interest in sports and hobbies<br>• Searches for values and is influenced by models other then the family—TV, movies, music, sports, books<br>• Begins to develop empathy for others as concepts of right and wrong become more flexible | and whole group shared reading in which the teacher engages students in discussion/modeling/demonstrations of more complex reading strategies that promote understanding of literary devices, vocabulary development, connections to text, and graphic aids in fiction and nonfiction texts<br>• Importance of providing, with guidance, opportunities for students to self-select fiction and nonfiction books, including series books, biographies, how-to-books, riddles, comics, and magazines<br>• Continued importance of providing children with opportunities for storytelling and dramatization of stories, reader's theatre, and choral reading | books (Laura Ingalls Wilder)<br>• *Attaboy, Sam!* (Lois Lowry)<br>• *The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses* (Paul Goble)<br>• *Martin's Big Words* (Doreen Rappaport)<br>• *Just A Dream* (Chris Van Allsburg)<br>• *More Rootabagas* (Carl Sandburg)<br>• *Joey Pigza Loses Control* (Jack Gantos)<br>• *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (C. S. Lewis)<br>• *A Bear for Miguel* (Elaine Marie Alphin)<br>• *Magic Schoolbus* books (Joanna Cole)<br>• *Finding Out about Whales* (Elin Kelsey)<br>• *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (J. K. Rowling)<br>• *Time Warp Trio* books (Jon Scieszka)<br>• *Can Jensen* books (David Adler)<br>• *When Marian Sang* (Pam Munoz Ryan)<br>• *George Washington's Breakfast* (Jean Fritz)<br>• *The American Girl* books (Connie Rose Porter et al.)<br>• *Nate the Great* books (Marjorie Weinman Sharmat)<br>• *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two* |

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| | | *Voices* (Paul Fleischman)<br>• *Because of Winn-Dixie* (Kate DeCamillo)<br>• *Encounter* (Jane Yolen)<br>• *Earth Lines: Poems for the Green Age* (Pat Moon)<br>• *Stone Fox* (John Reynolds Gardner)<br>• *Wilma Unlimited: How Wilma Rudolph Became the World's Fastest Woman* (Kathleen Krull) |

**Literacy Development****

- Reads silently most of the time and reads fluently when reading aloud
- Has a large core of known words that are recognized automatically
- Is moving toward sustained reading of texts with many pages that require reading over several days or weeks
- Knows how to read differently in different genres
- Connects texts with previously read texts
- Begins to identify with characters in books and to see himself or herself in the events of the stories
- Becomes absorbed in books
- Is in a continuous process of building background knowledge and realizes that he or she needs to bring his or her knowledge to reading
- Has systems for learning more about the reading process as he or she reads so that he or she builds skills simply by encountering many different kinds of texts with a variety of new words
- Interprets and uses information from a wide variety of visual aids in expository texts
- Analyzes words in flexible ways and makes excellent attempts at new, multisyllable words

* Adapted from *Becoming a Reader: A Developmental Approach to Reading Instruction* (O'Donnell & Wood, 1999).

** Adapted from *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) and *Guiding Readers and Writers, Grades 3-6: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

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Denise Johnson is an assistant professor of reading education at the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virigina. She received her Ed.D. in reading from the University of Memphis, Tennessee. She has worked as an elementary classroom teacher, a middle school reading specialist, and a Reading Recovery teacher. She now teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literacy education and conducts research on the integration of technology into preservice and inservice education courses and within elementary classrooms. Her articles on literacy and technology have been published in a variety of journals, and she is active in several professional organizations. She enjoys traveling with her family and reading to her son, Derek.

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